

The Audacity of HOPE VI:
Discourse and the Dismantling of Public Housing

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The dismantling of public housing in the United States is a policy initiative that is approaching its 20th year. The initiative, the centerpiece of which has been the HOPE VI program, involves the demolition of large public housing estates, the displacement and dispersal of low-income residents, and the replacement of some of the lost units as part of mixed-income communities. The demolition of public housing developments in favor of mixed-income alternatives is taking place in similar fashion in Australia, the UK, France and several other European nations. In the U.S. a “discourse of disaster” accompanies the policy initiative, framing the effort in ways that obscure the regressive nature of forced displacement and social housing retrenchment. The discourse utilized by policy elites represents public housing communities as deviant, dysfunctional, or obsolete. For their part, residents respond by utilizing an oppositional discursive strategy. The paper that serves as this special issue’s organizing document, “We Call These Projects Home” is a reclaiming of public housing as a “homeplace,” as a setting in which people make their homes and through a “common project of living” come together in communities (Burton and Clark 2005; Manzo, Kleit and Couch 2008).

There is a discursive element to almost all public policy issues, a narrative that defines the problem to be solved or the challenge to be met. The framing of the problem typically suggests a solution set of its own and establishes the terms of debate (O’Connor 2001). In this paper I examine the discursive element of public housing transformation; both the discourse of disaster that clears the way for wholesale demolition and displacement, and the discourse of resistance utilized by residents to reassert their

legitimacy as a community. Further, I argue that the narrative of home and community advanced by residents is supported by a growing body of social science research.

DISCOURSE AS AN ELEMENT OF COMMUNITY POLICY CHANGE

Critical discourse analysis is an examination of how language is implicated in social and policy change. In the policy arena, the process by which issues are identified and solutions are framed is central to understanding policy change outcomes. Stakeholders and policy elites influence those outcomes through the use of particular narratives. Problem narratives privilege certain policy interventions while simultaneously devaluing others. Narratives thus limit options by obscuring alternative understandings. The basis of critical discourse analysis is the contention that discourse, beyond being one interpretation of reality, also has the capacity to shape and create it. The examination of narratives, the exploration of the metaphors used, images invoked, and messages produced through the repetition of phrases is thus an examination of how language becomes constitutive of social practice (Darcy 2010). In some cases, discourse can be the means of policy implementation. Pfeiffer (2006), for example, shows how the renaming of the Cabrini-Green housing project, even while public housing residents remained on site, was a way of taking that community away from the residents.

A delegitimizing discourse is the vanguard effort of policy change. In the case of public housing transformation the critical first step is the devaluing, delegitimizing, and discrediting of the public communities that constitute social housing. Hastings (2004) argues that neighborhood decline is discursively represented in one of three ways, through a “pathological discourse” that emphasizes the underclass behaviors and morals of residents, a “structural discourse” that, for example, looks to the ways that global or

regional economic forces affect neighborhood conditions, and through a “neighborhood effects’ discourse that emphasizes the impact of the near-environment on resident behavior and outcomes.

Lipman (2008) and others argue that the current strategies of mixed-income revitalization originate in a neoliberal analysis (see also Darcy 2010; Hackworth 2007). The neoliberal tenets most commonly expressed in the social mix discourse include the debilitating impact of public housing on its residents, and the negative behaviors induced by such heavy state involvement. Weber (2002) suggests that the critical notion within the neoliberal discourse on neighborhoods is the concept of obsolescence. In contrast to the urban renewal era notion of “blight” which identifies problems of unhealthy and dangerous structures and therefore involves public purposes of harm reduction, the concept of obsolescence makes reference to economic value and marketizes the idea of neighborhood conditions.

I examine the role of discourse in public housing transformation through analysis of the statements of key stakeholders, high-ranking HUD officials, local housing authority directors and public housing residents. Sources include nationwide news media accounts of public housing demolition, articles written and other documents produced by participants.

PUBLIC HOUSING AS A DISCURSIVE SITE

The transformation of public housing in the U.S. has been facilitated by a vigorous discursive attack at both the national level and in individual cities across the country. At the national level, policy elites have controlled the debate over the qualities of public housing and the strategies for the future. The narrative condemning public

housing is notable for its audacity. Public housing is not merely a failure according to its critics, it is an apocalyptic tragedy. According to Bruce Katz, a top HUD advisor in the early 1990s who helped shape HOPE VI, public housing is “soul crushing,” the buildings themselves, according to former Vice President Al Gore, are “monuments to hopelessness,” and according to former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Henry Cisneros, “as close to the approaches to hell” as one can find in America.¹ A spokesman for the Atlanta Housing Authority, one of the most aggressive in dismantling its public housing system, called “public housing is a failed policy, and in many ways an immoral policy” (Pratt 2008a).

As Bennett (2000) argues, the dismantling of social housing estates is a three-stage process of “diminishment, dispersal, and demolition.” Public housing demolition represents a significant change of course in housing policy. In the U.S., public housing is the oldest housing policy in place aimed at providing affordable housing to the poor, and was home to almost three million Americans in the 1990s. The dismantling of public housing is significant both for its housing policy impacts and for the way in which it represents the passing of an era of Keynesian social welfare policy approaches.

Watershed moments like this are not achieved without an insistent and coherent story line justifying the abandonment of the status quo and the acceptance of a replacement agenda.

With respect to public housing in the U.S. the construction of deviance and threat has been central for many years. Public housing estates were routinely painted in the media as “zones of apocalyptic social decay, wanton violence, and depravity” in media representations (Macek 2006). As Lipman (2008, 121) argues, “racialized discourses of pathology legitimated the dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state.”

Animating the transformation of public housing have been three separate but related narratives of public housing disaster and dysfunction. The first is a pathologizing discourse that focuses on the behavioral deficiencies of public housing residents. Here, the tenants of public housing are either depicted as inherently lazy, promiscuous or dangerous, or they are said to have been reduced to such by the debilitating effects of public housing (Pfeiffer 2006). A second storyline has evolved around the theory of neighborhood effects. In this narrative the problem lies in the environmental press of concentrated poverty. This discourse carries with it a ready-made cure as well: mixed-income redevelopment and the greater choice and opportunity associated with it. The third narrative swirling around the dismantling of public housing consists of references to obsolescence. Obsolescence, in this case applies to the public housing structures themselves, or the landscape design in which they are set, or to the administrative and financial structure within which they operate.

Pathologizing public housing

Henderson's (1995) study of popular periodicals documents the critical representation of public housing dating back to the late 1960s, arguing that the national media took as exemplars the worst cases which led to an exaggerated and racialized understanding of the program's problems. The trend accelerated in the 1980s with the advent of crack cocaine on American streets. By the 1990s, visions of the "other America" were common fare for the media. Macek (2006, 167) offers an example, citing two stories reported on the *CBS Evening News* on consecutive nights in February 1994:

...the story opens with a shot of two men silhouetted against a gritty, downscale city street. 'They are there everyday' [the] voice-over

begins, ‘outside Chicago’s big housing projects, shadowy figures who gather on street corners and stand in doorways, hang out near the playground and sometimes push baby strollers.’ Meanwhile...we are treated first to a shot of four black men in stocking caps sitting on the stoop of a severe, institutional brick building; this is followed by a shot of black men standing in shadows, a shot-partially obscured by steam rising from the gutter-of a group of men on a street corner, a glimpse of three black men standing in the doorway of a housing project, a shot taken through chain link fencing of some men milling around an outdoor basketball court, and, finally, a quick take of a black man pushing a baby stroller past a desolate vacant lot.

Pfieffer (2007) offers a random sample of characterizations of Chicago public housing between 1999 and 2004 that includes “isolated... dangerous... oppressive... overwhelmed... prison-like, reeking... bleak and battered.” In 2003, a single CBS story on Cabrini Green noted that they had “been a blot on the skyline” of the city, “synonymous with gangs, drugs, misery and murder,” “cinderblock dinosaurs,” “a disaster” where children were “raised in squalor” (Kohn 2003).

Nationally syndicated columnist Neal Peirce referred to the Raymond Rosen Homes in 1995 as “an island – a black township - where crime, violence and drugs flourished” and which was “filled with trash, garbage and dead rodents that rotted in hallways and stairways.” In the same column Peirce characterized the George Vaughn public housing development in St. Louis as beaten, broken, and desolate, and the Techwood Homes of Atlanta as decayed and degenerated – examples of “public housing

projects that have turned into hellholes of gunshots, drugs, crime and stench” (Peirce 1995).

The idea that public housing was an affliction on entire areas is a common theme. Renee Glover, director of the Atlanta Housing Authority said, for example, that in the early 1990s the city suffered from high rates of poverty, crime, danger, and middle class flight, “and behind all of those problems were more than 40 public housing projects that distilled concentrated poverty into a toxicity from which there was no escape” (AHA 2011, 6). Indeed, the projects in Atlanta were so toxic, according to Glover, that they “were going downhill fast and dragging everything else in the city with them” (Glover 2009, 146). The director of public housing in Las Vegas felt much the same about his city: “[M]uch of the blight in those neighborhoods emanates from our public housing. If our public housing wasn’t there the neighborhoods would be better” (Pratt 2008b).

Neighborhood effects of concentrated poverty

Alice O’Connor argues that prevailing social scientific understandings of poverty take on political meanings as they are incorporated into policymaking. The theory of neighborhood effects is a case in point. Emerging in the 1980s the theory has centrally informed the policy elites who shaped and implemented HOPE VI and has, as a result, become part of the constructed reality of public housing transformation. The literature (see Ellen and Turner 1997 for a review) identifies multiple ways in which neighborhood effects can be produced, and these ways correspond to an equally complex set of means by which mixed-income housing is said to improve the lives of the poor (see Joseph et al. 2007). Public housing estates are implicated in the neighborhood effects model because, it is argued, they warehouse the poor producing high concentrations of poverty.

Local officials routinely make reference to the elimination of concentrations of poverty, characterizing the demolition and redevelopment of public housing as replacing concentrated poverty (*bad*) with mixed income communities (*good*). By extension, the residents of public housing, being shifted from *bad* to *good* communities, are assumed to experience benefits. HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan announced the 2012 Choice Neighborhood Grants (the successor program to HOPE VI) as efforts “to turn distressed housing and long-neglected neighborhoods into viable and sustainable mixed-income communities that support positive outcomes for families” (Skutch 2012). Chicago’s Plan for Transformation, the *Chicago Tribune* says, “was developed to take poor residents out of crime-ridden, dilapidated, mismanaged high-rises and place them in mixed-income communities where they can thrive” (Bowean 2012). Similarly, the Atlanta crusade to demolish all of its family public housing is defended by officials who “say the move from the old public housing, where all the residents are low-income, to private, mixed-income communities is better for families” (Davis 2010).

Public housing, it is maintained, must be remade into opportunity neighborhoods offering the range of resources and amenities available to the middle class. In this way it is possible to consider the forced eviction of a very-low income family as a means of increasing the housing choice of that family. As a spokesman for the Atlanta Housing Authority said, “what we want to do is make sure families can make choices about where they want to live. Government bureaucrats are not telling them where to live” (Jarvie 2008). Here, one of the most intrusive forms of state power that can be directed against citizens, forced relocation followed by the demolition of their homes, is presented as the opposite – the freeing of residents from the directives of government. This narrative

makes the dismantling of public housing a necessary by-product of efforts to create functioning communities. The loss of units is simply a given; “that was the trade-off,” explains New Urbanist architect Peter Calthorpe (2009, 61), “fewer public housing units in exchange for communities with more social integration.”

“Choice” and “opportunity” have become the watchwords of those designing the transformation of public housing (see Lipman 2008). HUD began using the term “opportunity neighborhoods” to designate places with little or no poverty. HUD and policy analysts began examining the “geography of opportunity” in order to inform forced mobility policies (see Cisneros 2009 for another example). Developers such as Richard Baron spoke of “communities of choice.” Peter Calthorpe (2009, 61), characterized HOPE VI projects as “healthier, safe, and more opportunity rich neighborhoods” than the public housing they replaced.

Obsolescence

Obsolescence is a frequently recurring theme among those explaining why public housing estates need to be demolished and redeveloped. It is common to read local accounts of demolitions like that of the Washington Beech public housing project in which a public official says by way of explanation simply that “they get so obsolete and uninhabitable that the only thing you can do is tear them down and start again” (McKim 2010).

The Robert Hitch Village in Savannah, built in 1959, had become “outdated and obsolete” and thus targeted for demolition 50 years after its construction (Skutch 2009). The Iroquois Homes in Louisville were torn down because, as the director of the Louisville housing authority said, “If not now, when? We just can’t continue to house

human beings in barracks-style housing that is 60 or 70 years old. It has outlived its usefulness” (Green 2010; see also Glover 2011). Public housing in Providence, Rhode Island and Tampa also came down because they were obsolete and ‘outmoded’ (see e.g., Davis 2011).

When the nature of the obsolescence is described, it is often related to functional obsolescence of the buildings or the site design. Developer Richard Baron, lead developer of many HOPE VI redevelopments across the country, claims that “most public housing was built to an obsolete standard and few were worth saving,” (2009, 35). However, the obsolescence argument also makes reference to the outdated notions of government control and direction that are embedded in the public housing program. Henry Cisneros (2009, 11) felt that public housing “had to transcend the ‘command and control’ bureaucratic model and use market dynamics unleashed by proven real estate management practices.” Richard Gentry, the head of the San Diego Housing Commission wrote, “running a local housing authority was akin to being an East German business manager” (2009, 220). The administrative model was according to Gentry an overly centralized, top-down system that provided almost no autonomy to local housing authorities. The solution was to bring public housing and its managers into the modern world: “The local housing authority of the future must be a locally-focused, opportunity seeking, full service real estate development and holding company, developing and managing the value of its investments for the good of the community” (2009, 220).

The discursive attack on public housing, focusing on the pathology of residents, the dysfunction of high-poverty neighborhoods, and political and functional obsolescence, obscures other understandings of public housing. Challenging demolition

and displacement thus requires an oppositional discourse, an alternative construction of public housing communities.

“WE CALL THESE PROJECTS HOME”: THE DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE

The publication of *We Call These Projects Home* is part of a discourse of resistance being generated by public housing residents and their advocates. The messages contained in the report echo and expand the responses of public housing residents in the many cities where demolition and displacement are being contested. Residents understand that they are contesting a powerful narrative that is being used to justify their displacement. Indeed, the resident group formed to oppose public housing demolition in Richmond, Virginia calls itself “RePHRAME” (the Residents of Public Housing in Richmond Against Mass Evictions) in a conscious nod to the challenge they face of reframing the storyline of public housing. The discourse of resistance is characterized by three counter arguments to the demolition of public housing. The central message focuses on claiming the projects as home, and asserting the existence of community within public housing developments. A second exposes the ways in which public officials and housing managers induce demolition through intentional neglect and disinvestment, often in order to clear the way for more lucrative redevelopment opportunities. The third argument is derivative of the first two; that forced displacement in the context of continued need for low-cost housing is a human rights issue.

Home and Community in Public Housing

The oppositional discourse of public housing residents is most frequently expressed in the narratives of home and community. This strategy is an attempt to counter the dehumanizing stigmatization suffered by public housing and its residents. It

is both a corrective to the storyline that paints public housing as unlivable hell-holes and an assertion of the positive and supportive nature of public housing communities.

An oral history of public housing residents in Tucson, Arizona published in 2000 is entitled *No Me Veas Diferente* (Don't Look at Me Different). The title of book is a reference to the stigma that attached to living in the Connie Chambers public housing project in Tucson before it was demolished in 1999. "*No Me Veas Diferente*" is a demand to accept public housing residents without stigma, and to accept public housing itself as a place where people live as most others do.

A reporter for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, writing in 2009 about the impending demolition of the St. Clair Village public housing project, notes that despite the run-down condition of the property "most residents of St. Clair are 'devastated' that the Pittsburgh Housing Authority is moving them out, said Cynthia Grace, president of the tenant council. One's home is home, she said, no matter what it looks like to someone else" (Jones 2009). A resident of Hitch Village in Savannah wanted to tell the President, "Don't tear down my home. Don't tear down all my childhood memories." Another simply said of Hitch Village, "I love it" (Peterson 2010). In Lexington, Kentucky 89 year old Gladys Showers, who raised eight children in the Bluegrass-Aspendale project said to reporters after the demolition of her home, "we was happy. I lived long, and I lived good" (Kegley 2010).

In addition to more personal references to "home" residents frequently invoke images of community when describing their lives in public housing. This is critical because a central element of the concentrated poverty – neighborhood effects discourse is the contention that "community" suffers in the harsh and barren environment of public

housing. Crowley (2009, 231) quotes a Detroit public housing resident saying, “I get real sad sometimes when I know I can’t go back to Herman Gardens. It makes me want to cry... I just felt safe there. At Herman Gardens, we just knew everybody.” Or, in the words of Robert Davidson of the Lathrop Homes in Chicago, attempting to save his development from the bulldozer in 2009, “Lathrop Homes is a wonderful community full of families, senior citizens, veterans, hard working folks, and it has also been a place for folks who might be down on their luck and might need some assistance to keep a roof over their heads” (Dizikes 2009). Jill Chenault Wilson of Lexington, Kentucky said of the Bluegrass-Aspendale projects, “it was just a close-knit neighborhood. Everyone was in the struggle together, just trying to maintain and survive” (Kegley 2010). In Baltimore, before the Lexington Terrace highrises were demolished, Loretta Thompson worried about having to move out. “No matter what, this has always been home. I really don’t want to leave the community, because I feel so close to people here.” Barbara McKinney lived in the same highrise and expressed similar views; “neighbors became family, and we were all together” (Daemmrich 1995).

The views of these residents, representative of some public housing tenants across the country contradict the discourse of disaster that has dominated the media and public policy circles. Most residents will readily admit the problems that exist in their communities. They see the results of institutional neglect and live with them on a daily basis. Yet, their view of life in the projects is not defined by those problems. As the narrator who opens the resident-produced video documentary of Chicago public housing entitled *Telling Our Story* says:

This is where we lived. It's not the best place to live. You hope for more for yourself, for your children, but for better or worse, it was still ours. We knew each other, most of us looked out for each other. We were like a village.

“They run it down to tear it down”

A second theme in the discourse of resistance asserts that officials have rationalized demolition by either exaggerating the conditions of projects, or by inducing physical decline through conscious neglect and disinvestment. That is, officials ‘run down’ the projects either in their words or by their deeds. This is a widespread reaction on the part of public housing residents who don’t agree that their developments needed the ‘radical surgery’ of demolition and redevelopment. Thus, the public housing resident in Duluth, Minnesota who claims, “You know you have to make everything seem really bad in order to get the [HOPE VI] funding, and that’s what they did, they made it seem really bad” (Goetz 2012a; see also Hilson 1995). More common, however, is the belief of residents that the local housing authority willfully neglected the property in order to justify demolition. For example, a Flint, Michigan public housing resident Ronnesha Holmes, expressed suspicion to newspaper reporters that the Housing Authority allowed the development to decline in order to get more federal dollars for the fix up; “It boils down to money. If you keep the appearance low then you can get more money” (Fonger 2010). Watching Lexington Terrace come down in Baltimore in 1996, former resident Janice Dowdy said, “it didn’t have to come down. They just let it deteriorate. I believe it could have been saved.” (Dang 1996). Activists opposed the demolition of the Connie Chambers Homes in Tucson on the same principle.

In several cities across the country, public housing residents have initiated lawsuits alleging that housing authorities have engaged in the *de facto* demolition of projects – the calculated disinvestment necessary to make demolition cost effective and politically palatable (Goetz 2012b). *Telling Our Story* describes one successful lawsuit filed by the Henry Horner Mothers Guild:

Narrator: The Mothers said that CHA [Chicago Housing Authority] allowed Horner [the Henry Horner Homes] to decay so they could demolish it. The courts agreed. So CHA signed a consent decree to replace the abandoned units with hundreds of new apartments. But in other developments, the housing authority continued the practice of allowing units to become vacant.

Frequently articulated in this narrative is the sense among residents that they are being pushed out in order to make way for others. As one source said in “Telling Our Story,” “this is the land grab that the residents have always feared that would come to pass.” Frequently there is a sense among residents that they are being pushed out of an area that is about to be redeveloped into something nice. As one resident of the Earle Village public housing complex in Charlotte, North Carolina said to housing authority officials, “this is prime land. You’re just running a game on us to get us to agree and you’ll move the rich people into the community” (Weisel and Meagher 1996, 23). In Chicago in the words of one resident the concern is about both gentrification and racial turnover: “We feel like man, they trying to like take over our neighborhood... Y’all moving these white folks over here. We’ve been here for like 25 years and now you

going to tell us we have to leave because you're moving these white folks here?" (Keene, Padilla and Geronimus 2010, 278).

The “Human Rights Crisis”

The demolition of what residents regard as their homes and as functioning communities, combined with the sense that the effort is the result of a calculated effort to manufacture the poor conditions necessary to rationalize displacement, leads to a framing of public housing transformation as a human rights issue (see Pfeiffer 2006). In 2009 the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing visited several U.S. cities to examine the crisis of affordable housing. In Chicago, New Orleans, and Los Angeles, public housing residents and their advocates used the visit as an opportunity to construct an anti-demolition discourse that focused on human rights and positioned the displacement occurring in the U.S. within a worldwide phenomenon of forced evictions and dislocation of the poor. The framing of public housing transformation as a human rights issue rests on the coercive nature of forced displacement as well as the continued and overwhelming need for such housing.

The website of the Coalition to Protect Public Housing reads:

Public housing residents in Chicago are experiencing a shocking human rights crisis. The Chicago Housing Authority's massive demolition of public housing units has left thousands of former residents without access to their homes and communities. Hundreds more have been made homeless by the demolition program. The Coalition to Protect Public Housing views these human rights violations as affronts to our dignity

and humanity, and we recognize that international law informs and can help remedy this situation.²

Resident communication often invokes the hardships of displacement, the “suffering” of their neighbors and the ways in which demolition adds “to a growing housing crisis for the poor” (quotes from *Telling Our Story*). The continuing need for public housing is also expressed by national advocacy groups such as the National Low Income Housing Coalition and the National Housing Law Project allied with public housing residents.

EVIDENCE OF HOME AND COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC HOUSING

The central message of the discourse of resistance focuses on the ways in which public housing has served as home and community. This is the narrative that most fundamentally challenges the discourse of disaster that has rationalized public housing transformation. A growing body of social science research is emerging that validates the discourse of resistance being created by tenants of public housing. Researchers examining the effect of demolition and displacement are documenting the nature and extent of social ties, supportive networks, and place attachment in public housing complexes that policy elites had painted as barren wastelands of hopelessness and despair. This work echoes the work of an earlier generation of social scientists who investigated neighborhoods subject to urban renewal. Gans’ (1962) famous and influential study of Boston’s West End neighborhood contrasted the reality of a functioning community with the image of blight and dilapidation offered by city planners of the time. Gans’ depiction of community life and of the value of the West End to its residents helped to alter the course of urban renewal away from demolition and toward

rehabilitation that preserved the working aspects of communities as much as possible. Similarly, Fried (1963) and Rainwater (1966) revealed the ways in which homes, even those in deteriorated neighborhoods, were meaningful for their inhabitants, and explained the attachment to place felt by lower-income residents that urban reformers were either unaware of or dismissed. Current research on public housing transformation is updating the story by documenting the existence of viable communities within distressed public housing, and exploring the dynamics of home-making in the projects.

Fullilove (2005) suggests that the public housing being demolished is the setting for the routines that residents establish to navigate the external environment in order to satisfy basic needs (finding food, maintaining shelter, and coexisting with others). For people of limited means, these routines are critical because of the slim to non-existent margins on which they live. Access to the correct bus routes, to jobs, to services, and to supportive informal networks is most critical for people with limited means because of the relative costs and difficulties of reestablishing these strategies once they have been disrupted. The loss of these places induces “root shock” which she defines as the “traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem” (Fullilove 2005, 10).

Manzo, Kleit and Couch (2008) studying displaced public housing residents in Seattle, Washington, found that the many residents thought of the development as a place that helped them meet their basic needs and carry out their “personal projects of living and survival.” The residents exhibited strong place attachment and referred to the safety and comfort of their public housing home. “We were safe and warm and we were stable,” said one resident (Manzo, Kleit and Couch, 2008, 1864). In addition, the project offered

a common life that was supportive and stabilizing to the residents. Despite language and ethnicity differences, the residents felt a solidarity stemming from their shared experiences of poverty and discrimination. Their daily social interactions provided them with a sense of belonging, sources of mutual assistance and material exchange, and a sense of security. This place, condemned and ultimately demolished by policymakers was a place where these low income families could carry out “the common project of living.” Most considered the fact that the project had been entirely inhabited by poor families to be the basis of solidarity and mutual support, not the source of dysfunction and decline described in the discourse of disaster. As described by a former resident of the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, “poor people help poor people. They have no one else, so they know how to help each other get by” (Crowley 2009 231).

Similarly, Keene and Geronimus (2011) find that close social ties are more common and stronger in public housing than in other forms of assisted housing. They attribute this to the stability of residence in public housing. Curley’s (2010) interviews with displaced families in Boston undermine the notion that the design of public housing was a cause of its decline. Those interviews indicated that the arrangement of buildings and common spaces in that community encouraged the development of trust, interactions, and neighborhood ties. Common entryways and living spaces, and the superbblock configuration with walkways and open space between buildings fostered “dense, overlapping networks [that] enhanced residents’ support systems and contributed to their collective efficacy” (Curley 2010, p. 47).

Venkatesh’s (2000, 234) study of the Robert Taylor Homes suggests that even in the infamously stigmatized environment of that Chicago public housing high rise

complex it is “unfair to characterize [it] as a socially disorganized community.” Williams (2004) documented the rich home life and highly developed social networks of women in Baltimore’s public housing projects. Findings from across the country affirm the importance of the social ties and support networks that exist among residents of public housing. In Philadelphia, Clampet-Lundquist (2010) finds that displacement may increase the sense of vulnerability for young people who are displaced because they face a “different threat environment” in their new neighborhoods without the security and predictability provided by their familiar social ties. Studies from Texas, Minneapolis, Seattle, Philadelphia, Boston and Tampa document how displaced public housing residents suffer social isolation and the loss of supportive social relationships after displacement (Barrett, Geisel and Johnston, 2006; Kleit & Manzo 2006; Goetz 2003; Curley 2009); Clampet-Lundquist 2004; and, Greenbaum et al. 2008).

CONCLUSION

We Call These Projects Home is an expression of resistance. Public housing redevelopments are, as Pfeiffer (2006) notes, discursive sites in which policy elites and residents struggle to frame the meaning of public housing communities. The debate related to these issues has been one-sided for many years, dominated by a top-down discourse of power that pathologizes and marginalizes public housing complexes and their residents. The success of this narrative has justified and cleared the way for regressive policies of displacement, eviction, and social housing retrenchment. The ability of residents to counter that discourse is limited in many ways. Nevertheless, residents have attempted to use legal means to stop demolitions, they have organized

protests against the actions of local officials, and, they have begun to fashion their own story of public housing.

The discourse of disaster is sprinkled with self-congratulatory references by policy elites to the audacity of their own actions – to their daring, outside-the-box approach to the entrenched problems of public housing communities. Thus one hears policymakers boast of “inventing solutions to problems” and “making it up as [they] went along.” Their solutions they characterize as “radical surgery” or “radical thinking.” The counter-narrative being produced by public housing residents puts the “audacity” of policymakers in a somewhat different light. As more social research validates the storyline of residents, the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of the poorest citizens in America becomes more apparently a regressive engagement of state power.

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¹ The first quote is from Katz (2009, 17). Al Gore is quoted in Williams (2004, 238).

The Cisneros quote is from a newspaper article, "Cisneros urges demolition of high-rise projects" (1994).

² <http://www.limits.com/cpph/CPPH%20Home%20Page.htm>.